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“The Eucharist and the Care for Creation”

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Introduction

I have been assigned a topic that invites us to delve into the depths of what it means to be truly Catholic. I say this because, as you well know, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist the “summit and source” of the Christian life.¹ The Eucharist is a multifaceted jewel set in the very crown of Catholicism. A jewel can be viewed from many angles, seen with the aid of light shining on it from various directions and therefore can be appreciated in any number of ways. But as the “summit and source” of the Christian life specifically, the Eucharist is the centre and pulsating heart of all our worship and prayer; the sacred action that derives from and returns us to daily life through, with and in the Eucharistic Christ. The Eucharist is integral to the very essence of Christianity. It also integrates all the facets of our life of faith. The Eucharist is heaven on earth and invites us to share even now in the fullness of God’s glory in heaven forever. In the meantime, we are fed on the bread of heaven and the chalice of eternal salvation.

I say all of this especially in light of our Holy Father’s encyclical *Laudato si’, On Care for Our Common Home*.² This document is among the most comprehensive of any papal encyclicals because in it the Pope integrates a number of issues, ideas and ideals:

- from environment to immigration, from the dangers of climate change to the urgency of food distribution,
- from political action on behalf of our common home to prayer and spirituality steeped in an awareness of creation,
- from actions to stop pollution and deforestation to contemplation of the goodness of and praise for the God of all creatures great and small,

- from placing the poor at the centre of our lives – not the periphery – to our concern for the cosmos in which we live.

Names for and about God.

The God we believe in is a God who acts. We believe in the biblical God of the covenant, the God of creation and the God of redemption. Ever since God invited Abraham and Sarah into a covenant relationship, all of us in the Judaeo-Christian tradition are related to God; and through that relationship in God, we are related to one another and every living creature as sharers in the covenant. The biblical phrase “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” is really a short hand way of saying that God is a relational God and that we are related to each other and to all creatures on this good earth, as Pope Francis reminds us again and again in *Laudato si*.³

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, sharing meals at table were moments of important divine self-disclosure and revelation. For example, in the gospel of St. Luke many of the most poignant moments of Jesus’ self-revelation occurred in the context of feeding and being at table: from the manger where animals are fed (Lk. 2:7,12), to the story of Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-42), to the parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the prodigal son (Lk. 15:1-32), to the disciples recognizing the risen Christ at table in the breaking of the bread (Lk. 24:13-35). The early Christians adopted and adapted Jewish ritual practices and used some of the Jewish liturgical phrases in Christian liturgy. Among these is the acclamation “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation.” As we prepare the bread and wine at the altar, we recall Abraham, who shared his food with three mysterious visitors (Gen. 18:8); Moses, who ate and drank with God on Sinai and did not die (Ex. 24:11); and Jesus, who when breaking bread on Sunday evening, showed forth his wounds (Lk. 24:31).

Paschal Offerings.

Our liturgy is paschal – it is always about the dying and rising of Christ and our incorporation into and continued participation in it. This begins in baptism and deepens whenever we celebrate the sacraments and all acts of liturgy. This incorporation and appropriation is summarized in the phrase “paschal mystery,” where “mystery” does not mean a problem to be solved, but a confounding reality that is overwhelmingly mystery-filled as a gift from God that we are to immerse ourselves in again and again.

One of the central dynamics at work in the Eucharist is summarized in the word offering – what God has offered and offers to us and what we offer back to God. God offers His own Son’s death and resurrection. As our Holy Father reminds us in his letter announcing the “Year for Mercy,” God always intended to save us and redeem us. We use these two terms again and again in the liturgy. This is because “salvation” is a healing metaphor, and “redemption” is an economic metaphor to describe the face and action of God toward us. “Salvation” suggests healing, and “redemption” describes the face and action of God toward us.

While we experience salvation and redemption in a number of ways, we do so especially in the Eucharist, which has often been called “the sacrament of the sacraments” – the premier

sacrament. In the mystery-filled dynamic of the Eucharist, we humans offer back to God what God has freely offered to us – His own Son’s death and resurrection. As the Holy Father reminds us, Christ’s saving death and resurrection has overcome the sin and death we inherited from Adam and Eve. To accomplish this, God the Father sent us his Son, like us in all things but sin. The Pope reminds us, “Jesus is the face of the Father’s mercy.” Jesus accomplished our redemption and reconciliation: he “buys us back” from a state sin, and he makes us one with God, each other, and all creation.

Jesus achieved all of this in obedience to his Father’s will and in doing so overcame the disobedience of Adam. Where sin abounded after the sin of Adam, now mercy abounds the more through the sacrifice of God’s very own Son, the second Adam (Rom. 5:20 and 1 Cor. 15:45).

Christ’s act of obedience as the new Adam led to his death and resurrection. By redeeming us with his own blood, in effect, Christ took the fear and pain out of suffering and death and by accepting suffering and death led us to a new kind of life in and through the resurrection. God the Father established that the death and resurrection of His Son would be the way we would be saved. We share in Christ’s death and resurrection in and through the act of the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, we offer back this saving sacrifice to the Father.

Dining on the Eucharistic bread and cup is how we participate in the paschal mystery and the saving sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist. Let us examine the dynamic of the bread and wine used in this sacrament.

A premise of the celebration of sacramental liturgy is that we use the good things from this earth to worship God. They have been given to us by the “God of all creation” and they are the “fruit of the earth.” Almost all the liturgies we celebrate involve the earth and our companions on the earth. For example, the welcoming of the light of day and acknowledging the shadows of evening shape Morning and Evening Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours. We use water in baptism. Why? Because it is the only primal element in the universe (except air) without which we cannot live. Is it any wonder that the water that sustains human life is the element we use to initiate us into the very life of God, our entrance to eternal life?

But there is another level of meaning behind the use of bread and wine at the Eucharist. These gifts are from the earth, but are also the result of human “work.” “Work” here means human ingenuity, productivity, and “manufacture” – which literally means something “made by hand.” That some central elements used in the liturgy are the “work of human hands” like oil, as well as bread and wine, respects humans’ ingenuity to produce things that literally reproduce in themselves the paschal process of dying and rising. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato si’* humans are to “have dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). He deepens these assertions by saying: “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man ‘dominion’ over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church” (n. 67).

He then asserts that (Gen. 2:5) “tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving. This implies a relationship of

mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. This is part of the theology that underlies our working with fellow creatures to manufacture bread and wine for the Eucharist.

There is a rich theology of creation in reflecting on the ‘bread-ness’ of the bread and the ‘wine-ness’ of the wine we consume in the Eucharist.

Among the things we offer in the Eucharist as the work of human hands, is the sweat of the human brow. Cardinal Basil Hume (former archbishop of Westminster, London, England) once remarked, “no work, no Mass.” Part of its being a sacrament is the human work which makes all the things we will use for the Eucharist, especially bread and wine. So the worship and honour we *offer* to God in the Eucharist starts long before the liturgy in church begins. It commences in the liturgy of human life as blessed by God, with humans planting, harvesting, baking and wine-making, and delivering these gifts to the church for the Eucharist. The talents we humans have for thought and work fashion what we need to celebrate the Eucharist. What we are and use outside of the liturgy is brought into the act of liturgy to be transformed.

Simply put, what lies behind the manufacture of the bread and wine for the Eucharist is that they are *paschal processes*. There is a dying and rising in planting, harvesting, baking or fermenting – all of which comprise the foundation for the celebration of the Paschal mystery in the Eucharist and for our participation in the dying and rising of Christ in and through the Eucharist.

In effect, there is an important link between the paschal process involved in manufacturing bread and wine and the fact that dining on consecrated bread and wine is the uniquely Eucharistic means we have to participate in Christ’s paschal dying and rising.

In a parallel way, we can say that there is a spirituality derived from every act of the Eucharist because what we do at Mass shapes our lives. A chief aspect of all Eucharistic participation is to allow the paschal dying and rising enacted through what occurs at the altar table to be the true measure of anything that is of real value in life. The challenge is twofold. First, it is to allow what we enact in the Eucharist to be the measure of our lives. In effect, we are to view life through the lens of the paschal mystery, which mystery helps us evaluate what is important in life. It is this lens that allows us to look at apparent defeats – sickness, suffering and setbacks in life, even death itself – and to evaluate them against the paschal mystery. Secondly, a requisite consequence of Eucharistic enactment is to share the goods of this earth with the poor and the needy. This takes us back to the Encyclical.

Food Distribution and Just Working Conditions.

Food Distribution and Diakonia.

In *Laudato si’* the Holy Father links a theology of ecology with food distribution, especially for the poor. In a very poignant section of the encyclical the Pope offers us a piercing challenge, not to say condemnation, by asserting that “we know that approximately a third of all food produced

is discarded, and ‘whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor’.”⁴ This phrase is reminiscent of the challenge offered by some Latin American theologians when they state that you cannot celebrate the Eucharist with stolen bread. This reference to food brings us back to the celebration of the Eucharist where the presentation of gifts of bread and wine on the altar represent the collecting of gifts to be distributed to the poor. The first summary description of the way the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist comes to us from St. Justin the Martyr in the middle of the second century. He notes that the wealthy offer gifts for the poor at the time of the presentation of the Eucharistic gifts. The custom of having deacons collect and distribute these gifts is attested in liturgical literature through the time when the (permanent) diaconate faded from the practice of the Roman Church.

One of the contributions of the restored (permanent) diaconate is evident in the relationship of the deacon’s service at the altar and in a life of service outside of Mass especially to the poor, the marginalized, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised. What the deacon does in the liturgy connects with what he does outside the liturgy. This very ministry images for us the kind of ministerial life which Eucharistic participation presumes. The Eucharist as the body of Christ unifies the church; and it should challenge us to abandon some of the selfishness in life in favour of self-giving and surrender of the self so that others may eat and be cared for by the (same) Lord. Christ’s paschal victory began with his humble acceptance of suffering and death. The deacon’s ministry reflects the Lord when it is humble service at the altar and in all of life as a consequence of what occurs at the altar table. Like all good church ministry, the deacon’s ministry is meant to show all of us how we should live our lives – in service both in the liturgy celebrated in church and in the living out of that liturgy in the liturgy of life. In effect, this is to say that the deacons are the permanent personification of the intrinsic relationship of liturgy and life, and the Eucharist specifically as the “summit and source” of the Christian life.

The diaconate is not the only important restoration. The presentation of gifts for the poor has been restored as an important part of the celebration of the Eucharist at the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday. It is both a traditional practice and a reminder of how the celebration of the Eucharist links sanctuary and marketplace, altar and dining at home, consecration of bread and wine and feeding and sheltering the poor and the homeless.

Indeed, taking and collecting of gifts for the Eucharist always implies the sharing of some of those gifts with the poor and needy. The symbolism of the deacon as one who ministers both at the altar and to the poor outside the liturgy personifies and exemplifies this ritual. To share one’s talents and offerings at the Eucharist reflects one’s talents and generosity to others outside the celebration of the Eucharist. From the perspective of “sacramentality” as articulated here, we can say that there is a keen interrelationship between preparing and sharing food at the Eucharist with sharing food in everyday life – especially at the daily and domestic “ritual” of taking meals together.

Just Working Conditions.

The articulation of the phrase “work of human hands” is a constant reminder that the Eucharistic liturgy derives from creatures on the earth and that human work is noble and part of human self-

expression. At the same time, it can also be an important reminder that all humans share in the dignity of being daughters and sons of God and deserve both humane working conditions and a living wage for their work. As early as Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) the official magisterium of the Catholic Church has insisted on a just wages and working conditions. Because these teachings have never been fully implemented, to our widespread shame, more recent papal teachings reiterate and deepen what Leo taught. These include Pope Paul VI in 1972 (*Octogesima Adveniens*), Pope John Paul II in 1991 (*Centesimus Annus*), and Benedict XVI in 2009 (*Caritas in Veritate*). This relationship is at the heart of Pope John Paul II encyclical in 1981 on human work (*Laborem Exercens*).

In addition to human suffering caused by human action, unfair work practices can also impoverish the earth itself. Again, our Holy Father cites pollution, deforestation and ecological imbalances that result from unjust practices. For example, the Pope speaks this way about pollution in *Laudato si'* (n. 20):

Some forms of pollution are part of people's daily experience. Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths. People take sick, for example, from breathing high levels of smoke from fuels used in cooking or heating. There is also pollution that affects everyone, caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general. Technology, which, linked to business interests, is presented as the only way of solving these problems, in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others.⁵

This leads to his now often-used phrase “the throwaway culture.” Here the Pope combines a critique of unchecked free market approaches to the economy that destroy this good earth with a challenge to us all personally about the ways we “use and abuse” our companions on the earth – plants, animals, the earth itself.

Another aspect of the Holy Father's concern for humanity regards leisure in general and the Sabbath in particular.⁶ In fact, this concern reaches back to when he was archbishop in Buenos Aires, as reflected in the Latin American Bishops' Conference document on evangelization in 2007.⁷

The requirement of the Sabbath observance derives from the Old Testament and is a hallmark of Jewish observance to this day. That it begins at table in the evening by invoking “Lord, God of all creation” is, again, poignant and rich for us Jews and Christians theologically.

There is a fairly new shopping centre just outside of the New Gate in the city of Jerusalem. It has numerous stores and is a remarkable architectural achievement. What is very poignant, especially for a western Christian, is to see the neon sign that says “24/6!” That is the Sabbath in present day “up in lights.” But as we all know, the Sabbath rest is not that simple, especially in a “24/7” Internet culture. I wonder whether the sweatshops where mass produced goods result in a de-humanization of too many of our brothers and sisters are replaced in other cultures with the

“electronic sweatshops” of our Internet machines that lead to an equally de-humanized society. As Joseph Pieper asked in his book *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, what is the basis of our culture without the presumption of leisure, which leisure led to personal integration and societal cohesion? Prophetically and poignantly Pope Francis takes this to another level when he speaks of the Internet in *Laudato si'* (n. 47) and the quality of human relationships.

The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is meant to be framed by leisure, the kind of sacred leisure that the Sabbath prescriptions insured. To celebrate the Eucharist with and for each other is integral to the kind of “human” ecology which popes have called for since St John Paul II and the integral ecology so forcefully argued by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*:⁸

237. On Sunday, our participation in the Eucharist has special importance. Sunday, like the Jewish Sabbath, is meant to be a day which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world. Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, the “first day” of the new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord’s risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality. It also proclaims “man’s eternal rest in God”. In this way, Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. We tend to demean contemplative rest as something unproductive and unnecessary, but this is to do away with the very thing which is most important about work: its meaning. We are called to include in our work a dimension of receptivity and gratuity, which is quite different from mere inactivity. Rather, it is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence. It protects human action from becoming empty activism; it also prevents that unfettered greed and sense of isolation which make us seek personal gain to the detriment of all else.

Significance of the Celebration of the Eucharist.

We see that the gathering and making by humans for the Eucharist are linked to the sacramentality of all of life. We see how the Eucharist continues Christ’s paschal victory via death and resurrection. This combination of life and death, positive and negative puts the world into proper perspective as both graced filled and flawed and in need of complete redemption. Our Eucharistic liturgy prevents us from becoming too optimistic about the world

Yet sacramental liturgy also combats pessimism about the world and world events. By its very shape and structure, sacramental liturgy is a ritual experience that reflects an optimistic approach to human life. In the end, “all will be well.” In the meantime, we need sacramental liturgy to put the world into focus and perspective. Opportunities for experiences of hope abound in the celebration of sacraments – hope in the act of liturgy and hope derived from the act of liturgy which enables us to deal with life.

A second important point is that the Eucharist substantiates the contemporary emphasis on the theology of creation and places it on a truly theological ground by emphasizing that God’s goodness is the source of the things of this earth used in liturgy. The water is a natural symbol

from God's providence; bread and wine result from human manufacture of what the earth has produced.

Third, sacramental liturgy enacts our belief that we worship God by using the things of this world. This means that sacramental liturgy is always both anthropological and cosmic; it articulates what we believe about the human person and the cosmos. Or better, through sacramental liturgy human persons put their lives and the world itself into proper perspective. We use "daily and domestic things" in liturgy, specifically in the Eucharist food and dining, and they remind us of the goodness, generosity and largesse of the God we worship.

Among the things which the enactment of the Eucharist accomplishes is that bread and wine, taken and shared, are the regular ritual reminders of what it means to share in God's very life and grace throughout our lives. It is the liturgical taking of food and drink, the liturgical act of blessing food and drink, the liturgical act of sharing the Eucharist as food and drink that puts human dining into perspective and gives it its depth. The three steps of manufacture, proclamation and sharing of food apply not just to the Eucharistic liturgy. They happen in daily life too and echo the sacramentality of human life, because sacramentality means that we experience God in and through the world and all that dwell on it, and because we use words and actions to communicate with each other and to sustain life. The sacrament of the Eucharist articulates and specifies for believers that here and now God is operative in all of their lives. Sacramental liturgy thus provides the lens we need in order to view all of reality, which reality is always integrative of the sacred and secular and of what is both fully divine and fully human.

The task then is to make sure we view liturgy as a deep and strong ritual expression of the fact that God lives among us prior to, in a unique way within, and following upon sacramental engagement. The function of sacramental liturgy in its uniqueness is about bringing to the world what we have experienced in the liturgy. Even more important is to underscore how what we do in liturgy derives from the world and everyday life. Its liturgical ritualization helps us order our lives and our world once more in God's image and likeness. From the perspective of sacramentality, one can say that sacraments are less doors to the sacred than they are the experience of the sacred in and through human life, which experience is shaped by the liturgical action of the Eucharist.

Every time we take bread and wine in the act of doing the Eucharist we articulate the theology of the goodness of creation and our need for food to sustain us as the "pilgrim church on earth" until we are fed at the "Supper of the Lamb." In the meantime, the very taking, blessing and sharing of bread and wine make the central theological statement about our place in the cosmos. All sacramental liturgy makes sense in the first place because the use of goods from the earth remind us of our place in this world.

Having a wide-angle lens on as much of life as possible is true to the Catholic principle of sacramentality. Part of the challenge which celebrating sacramental liturgy can offer is to help us reflect back on the world in which we live and to ponder our care for it as well as our concern for those who dwell on it. This means taking seriously our obligation of being in communion with and caring for our common home. We are never to presume that we are its masters or its lords. We are fellow companions, responsible to succeeding generations for our care of it.

Endnotes

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1324.

² See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

³ This is a rich and recurring theme in *Laudato si'*, and one that requires that we rethink and reimage how we understand plants, animals and all other living things as companions.

⁴ *LS*, n. 50. Here the Holy Father cites his own catechesis on June 5, 2013, three months into his papacy.

⁵ The Holy Father continues:

N. 21. Account must also be taken of the pollution produced by residue, including dangerous waste present in different areas. Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish. Industrial waste and chemical products utilized in cities and agricultural areas can lead to bioaccumulation in the organisms of the local population, even when levels of toxins in those places are low. Frequently no measures are taken until after people's health has been irreversibly affected.

⁶ This was also a concern of Pope John Paul II in *Dies Domini* (1998).

⁷ See, <http://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>.

⁸ Clearly a major contribution of *Laudato si'* is chapter four on human ecology.”